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SUBJECT: AFGHANISTAN RECONSTRUCTION AND THE NIGERIAN PRESS

Reftel: STATE 251043

1. Summary. Interest in Afghanistan and USG actions in rebuilding the country is low among Nigeria's southern journalists. There is more interest in the print media in Nigeria's mostly Muslim north, which occasionally publishes Afghan-related material, mostly in the context of stories on Iraq, which remains the lead international story. Radio newscasts of continuing developments in Afghanistan are more frequent, and have a much wider audience in Nigeria than television or print journalism. Common misperceptions regarding Afghanistan center on Afghan President Karzai as a U.S. puppet leader with no popular support, as well as accusations of massive Afghan casualties suffered during the removal of the Taliban government. Public affairs strategies to improve Nigerian understanding of Afghanistan should focus less on the USG and more on commentaries/statements by UN officials, key Muslim figures in Afghanistan, and regional leaders from Islamic countries who support Karzai and continued USG actions in Afghanistan. End Summary.

Afghanistan Not a Media Priority in Nigeria

2. Afghanistan is no longer a story that generates much media attention in southern Nigeria, where average Nigerians are far more focused on the upcoming national elections, the continuing debate over the riots surrounding the Miss World contest, and pressing domestic economic and political issues. In Nigeria's mostly Muslim north, news regarding Afghanistan is more common, although it largely consists of straight news stories and statements by USG officials carried on VOA and BBC. Northern print journalists often include references to Afghanistan within the context of articles on Iraq, which remains the lead international news story in the north and the south. Public opinion among Muslims regarding the U.S. role in Afghanistan tends to be negative and simplistic, with the U.S. regarded as having imposed its will on the country as part of its global war against terrorism and Islam. Afghan leader Hamid Karzai is generally viewed as a puppet leader installed by U.S. military force, and someone who lacks popular support among the Afghan people. Coverage on Afghanistan also centers on the U.S. military role rather than on reconstruction efforts. Stories in the print media continue to assert that Afghanistan suffered large numbers of civilian casualties during the U.S. military campaign against the Taliban. A December 9 story in the northern-based independent newspaper, "Daily Trust," said that "the war, just like the (terrorist) attack on the U.S., left thousands of so-called terrorists and civilians dead, killed by "un-smart" bombs in these days of "smart bombs."

3. A USG public affairs strategy for Nigeria should focus less on USG officials speaking on Afghanistan and more on statements from UN officials, Afghans, and Muslim leaders from the Middle East and South Asia. While the U.S. is playing a positive role, focusing on USG leadership in the reconstruction effort will unfortunately reinforce negative perceptions of unwanted USG domination of the Afghan people. The USG should emphasize the strong UN role in Afghanistan as well as Afghan ownership of the Bonn process and reconstruction strategy. The USG role should be viewed as supportive of the international community's strategy for Afghanistan. That said, we should continue to make certain that the Nigerian public is aware of international humanitarian contributions to Afghanistan and America's leading role in prodding the

international community to do more. We also need to continue pressing the theme of how bad life was for average Afghans under the Taliban and how hope for an improved future exists today due to the Taliban's ouster.

14. Public affairs strategies that would enhance the Nigerian Muslim public's knowledge of the USG commitment to Afghanistan could include Hausa language radio interviews with Afghan religious leaders who support Karzai and the USG, as well as interviews with Kofi Annan and the UN Secretary General's Special Representative Lakhdar Brahimi on the Bonn process, UN activities in Afghanistan, and the continuing need for USG support for Afghanistan. Messages regarding Iranian government support and that by other Islamic leaders for Karzai would also be useful in countering Karzai's image as a President whose appeal does not extend beyond the United States. The U.S. mission to Nigeria publishes a Hausa-language magazine ("Magama") that targets Hausa-speaking elites; excerpts or digests of radio programming could be included in upcoming issues. Finally, we would suggest a press tour in Afghanistan for a small group of African journalists (preferably Muslims or those from Sub-Saharan countries with large Muslim populations), which would provide a first-hand opportunity to speak with Afghans and international community officials on how far Afghanistan has progressed in the post-Taliban period.

JETER